

Understanding Stress

What Is Stress?

Stress is our natural response to life's challenges. It's part of our "fight or flight" reaction and it can be a good thing. A healthy stress response helps us meet important deadlines or react well to danger. But this ancient biological reaction is often inappropriate in modern life. If we're sitting in traffic or writing an urgent report, assaulting the driver in front or fleeing the office is unlikely to help. Usually, we realize this and restrain ourselves, but the result can be frustration, irritation, anger – and stress.

What Causes Stress?

A common cause of stress is an imbalance (perceived or real) in the demands made on us, and our ability to cope with them. This imbalance can lead to feelings of inadequacy, lack of control and deeper fears that we are unable to meet life's challenges. Finding a balance between life's demands and our ability to deliver is crucial to effective stress management.

Why Is Stress Damaging?

Persistent stress can take a serious toll on our mental and physical health. Common problems include headaches, sleep and stomach problems, but long-term stress can also contribute to heart problems, high blood pressure and ulcers.

What Are the Signs of Stress?

Stress manifests itself in many different ways. Here are some of the symptoms:

Physical

- Headaches
- Rapid breathing
- Sweaty palms
- Dry mouth
- Palpitations
- Light-headedness
- Stomach aches
- Difficulty concentrating
- Sleep problems

Emotional

- Insomnia
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Nightmares
- Crying spells
- Feeling unable to cope

Behavioral

- Alcohol or drug use
- Reduced sex drive
- Irritability and impatience
- Anger and aggression
- Social isolation
- Lack of energy
- Changes in appetite
- Loss of interest and boredom

No one is immune from stress, and with the increasing demands on our fast-paced lives, stress is at an all time high. But if we can't avoid stress altogether, we can recognize it early and respond in ways that reduce its impact.

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